



The Bonfire Boys

Special Constables

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Every November 5th
in Lewes, Sussex, a spectacular
"Bonfire Night" takes place,
with torches, fireworks, music and
elaborate costumes.
Thousands of people attend.

The tradition began as a
commemoration of the 1605
Guy Fawkes gunpowder plot, and hit a
crisis point in 1847 when
eight Bonfire Boys were sent to prison
for causing a riot.

My ancestor John Stanbridge
and his brother Thomas
were among them.



The Magistrates assembled at eleven o'clock
this morning for the purpose of swearing in a
large number of Special Constables, in order to
preserve the peace of the town on the
approaching 5th of November.

The swearing-in attracted a great number of
persons to the court, which was much crowded.

Mr. Saxby, chemist, presented a memorial from the inhabitants of Lewes, expressing a hope that the Magistrates would change their determination and direct the summonses to be withdrawn.

Earl of Chichester: How many have been summoned?

Mr. Kell [the clerk of the court]: 170, my lord.

Earl of Chichester: How many have signed the memorial?

Mr. Saxby: 108 signatures.

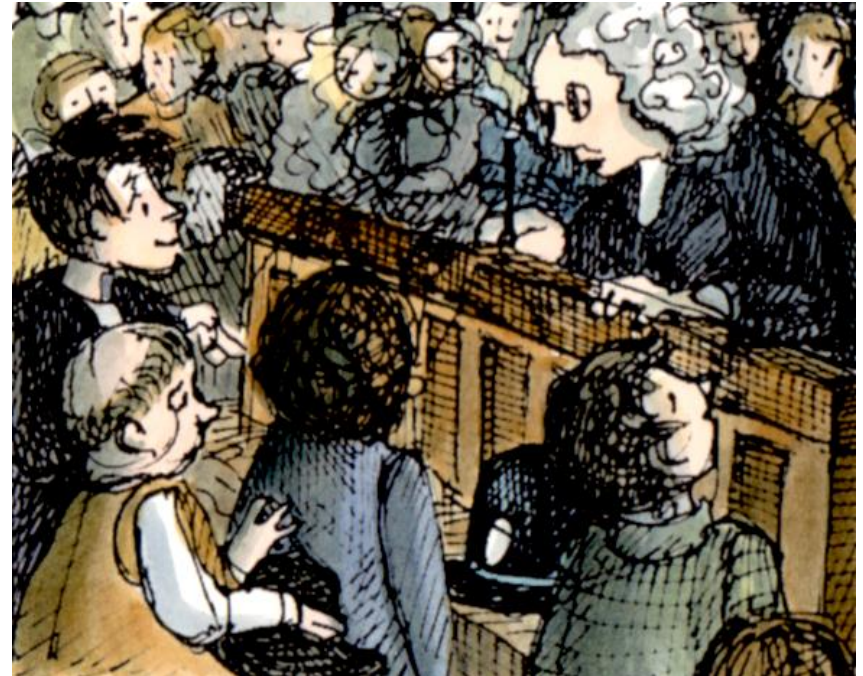
Earl of Chichester: Did every person at the meeting sign it?

Mr. Saxby: With one single exception.

“And that’s me,” observed some person in the court.

The Earl of Chichester then said the course pointed out by law was a very plain one. Every one who refused to be sworn in was liable to a penalty of five pounds. He was sorry to find that there was a reluctance to come forward in support of the law.

He hoped he should not hear any more of that reluctance, because if he did, the Magistrates’ duty was plain, and they would not fail to act upon it.



There was a manifestation of displeasure in the court, and the Earl of Chichester ordered the man who had caused the interruption to be turned out, but he could not be found.



The Magistrates then proceeded to swear in the persons who had been summoned. Many of them claimed exemption on grounds which produced no little amusement.

John Bates claimed exemption on the ground that he was a beer-shop keeper; but the Magistrates would not excuse him.

Benjamin Batchelor Bateman had a bad finger. The Magistrates told him to produce a certificate. He did so, and was excused.



Mr. John Gibbs said that his house was situated in a part of the town where more fireworks were let off than at any other place.

He had an afflicted wife and six children to protect, and how was he to do it if he were called away?

Earl of Chichester: Your house will be taken good care of.
Mr. Gibbs: Suppose I am ordered to any other part of the town. Shall I be obliged to leave my house?
Earl of Chichester: You will be under orders, and the Magistrates have decided that you ought to serve. Are you willing?
Mr. Gibbs (sullenly): I am.

Mr. Kell then proceeded to administer the oath.

Mr. Kell (reading): I do swear.
Mr. Gibbs: Do swear.
Mr. Kell: That I will well and truly serve.
Mr. Gibbs: Well and truly serve. (laughter)
Mr. Kell: Our sovereign Lady the Queen.
Mr. Gibbs: Lady the Queen. (renewed laughter)

Earl of Chichester (with warmth): This will not do, Mr. Gibbs; you must repeat the words properly. Mr. Kell, begin again, they are not repeating the words.

Mr. Kell: I do swear.
Mr. Gibbs: Well, I DO swear. (loud laughter)
Earl of Chichester: Mr. Gibbs, you must treat the Court with proper respect.
Mr. Gibbs: I will, my lord.



Mr. Kell read the oath to them, which was anything but audibly repeated.

William North, Samuel Medhurst and John Steers refused to take the oath, and were each fined five pounds.

SOURCES

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Brighton Gazette, November 4 and 11, 1847, and excerpts transcribed from the *Sussex Express* of November 13, 1847. With sincere appreciation to Jim Etherington, of the Lewes Historical Society, August 2011.

“Spring Assizes, Home Circuit, Lewes, March 23,” *The Times* (London), 24 March 1848, page 7, cols 4-5.

“Lewes Bonfire Night Celebrations,” [online] Lewes website (<http://www.lewes.co.uk/bonfire.aspx> : accessed July 15, 2011).

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Excerpt from *Sussex Agricultural Express*, 23 October 1847, transcribed by Jim Etherington of the Lewes Historical Society and kindly provided via email, August 2011.

